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ABSTRACT

To explore how knowledge influences opinion in foreign policy, results of a survey on voter familiarity with and attitude toward nuclear policy issues were compared with three theoretical models of the knowledge/opinion relationship: (1) the enlightenment model--as knowledge increases, support for belligerent foreign policy stands decreases; (2) the mainstream model--as knowledge increases, conformity to official positions grows; and (3) the cognitive consistency model--greater knowledge parallels increased correspondence between general beliefs and opinions on specific policies. Results of the comparison, contradicting a 1963 study, lend some support to the enlightenment and cognitive consistency models. Failure to corroborate earlier support of the mainstream model may be due to the public's decreased faith in political or technological experts. (MM)

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Knowledge and Opinion on the Nuclear Freeze:

A Test of Three Models

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Knowledge and Opinion on the Nuclear Freeze: A Test of Three Models

The relationship between knowledge and opinion has interested political thinkers for many years. One of the tenets of classic democratic theory is the idea that an enlightened public will make the right decisions. Contrary to that notion, however, social science studies have indicated the public is not very well informed in the foreign affairs area[1] and its decision-making process in the political area is not very rational.[2]

Some order was imposed on debate in this area by Gamson and Modigliani, who suggested three models describing the relationship between knowledge and opinion -- the enlightenment model, the mainstream model and the cognitive consistency model.[3] These models present three alternative possibilities for the relationship between knowledge and opinion. Gamson and Modigliani tested their models on the topic of general foreign policy, and found some support for the mainstream and cognitive consistency models. Sigelman and Conover, writing in 1981, questioned the validity of 16-year-old models and conducted a replication.[4] Their study of public opinion and knowledge concerning the Iranian crisis found little support for the enlightenment and cognitive consistency models, but some support for the mainstream model.

The present study presents an additional test of the Gamson

and Modigliani models, but with a different topic -- the nuclear freeze. This additional replication may clarify the somewhat contradictory findings of the Gamson and Modigliani and the Sigelman and Conover studies. In addition, this study may broaden our understanding of how public opinion on the nuclear freeze has developed, an interesting and timely issue in itself.

The nuclear freeze moved very quickly to the center of the American political arena in the early 1980s, particularly during the year 1982. A poll conducted by ABC News and The Washington Post in April of 1982 showed 71 percent of the general public supporting a freeze and 25 percent opposed.[5] A CBS News/New York Times poll released in June of 1982 showed 72 percent supporting and 21 percent opposed.[6] Around the same time, 700,000 people participated in an antinuclear weapons rally in New York's Central Park that may have been the largest political demonstration in the country's history. Freeze supporters have been called the "New Abolitionists," a phrase comparing the abolition of nuclear weapons with the abolition of slavery.[7] They have also been called "naive" and "Freezeniks" by opponents, and attempts have been made to link the movement to Soviet agents.[8]

The ultimate effects of the nuclear freeze movement remain to be seen. The large numbers of supporters reflected in the polls and in the Central Park rally, however, along with the movement's growth out of peace group activities going back a decade,[9] suggest that it is more than a passing fad.

The Models

The three models to be tested here in the area of nuclear issues were originally developed by Gamson and Modigliani as possible statements of the relationship between knowledge and opinion in the area of foreign policy. The enlightenment model suggests that, with increasing knowledge and sophistication, people are more likely to reject a belligerent foreign policy orientation. The mainstream model suggests that increasing knowledge is associated with greater attachment to the political mainstream, and thus that the greater the knowledge, the greater the degree of conformity of one's foreign policy opinions to official policy. The cognitive consistency model suggests that greater knowledge is associated with greater conceptual sophistication, and that therefore the greater the knowledge, the stronger the relationship between one's general beliefs and one's opinions on specific policies.

Gamson and Modigliani tested their three models in the general area of foreign affairs, using data from a sample survey of 558 Detroit residents conducted in 1963-64. They used knowledge questions asking which of several countries were in Africa, had atomic weapons and had Communist governments. Specific policy questions concerned policy toward China, trade with Russia and military build-up. Their measure of general attitudes dealt with beliefs and assumptions about the Soviet Union.

Gamson and Modigliani concluded that their results were best explained by a combination of the mainstream and cognitive

consistency models. There was a tendency for increased support for government policy with increased knowledge. But there was also a tendency for the relationship between general attitudes and specific policy options to become stronger as knowledge increased. The authors pointed out that this latter finding really amounts to knowledge having a polarizing effect, since under high knowledge the hard-liners toward Russia were likely to favor one specific policy while the soft-liners were likely to favor a contrary policy.

Sigelman and Conover conducted a retest of the Gamson and Modigliani models using public opinion data dealing with the Iranian crisis. They argued that the models may not hold in the same way because a number of events occurring in the 16 intervening years might have weakened attachment to the mainstream (the political scandals of the 1970s) or lessened belief in an aggressive foreign policy (Vietnam).

The Iranian hostage crisis began on November 4, 1979, with the takeover of the American embassy in Teheran. The Sigelman and Conover data were taken from a telephone poll of 416 residents of Lexington, Kentucky, conducted between December 4 and 18, 1979. Knowledge questions asked how the present leader of Iran came into power, the names of several countries geographically close to Iran and the major religion of Iran. Questions on specific policies dealt with sending the Shah back to Iran, waiting to see if the situation resolved itself, sending the Shah to a country other than Iran, setting up an American naval blockade of Iran and actually sending American troops to Iran. General foreign

policy belief was measured with three questions dealing with respondents' predispositions toward or away from a hard-line, militaristic and nationalistic approach to the conduct of American foreign relations.

Sigelman and Conover found little support for the enlightenment and cognitive consistency models, and a mixed pattern of support for the mainstream model.

The results of these two studies are somewhat contradictory, but neither provides much support for the enlightenment model. One provides some support for the cognitive consistency model and both provide some support for the mainstream model. The present study will determine whether this general tendency for greatest support for the mainstream model also takes place in the area of opinion on the nuclear freeze.

Data and Method

Data for retesting the three models were taken from a probability sample of 405 registered voters in Austin, Texas. Interviews were done by telephone between October 19 and 26, 1982, with the last date approximately one week before the November election. The interviews were conducted by graduate students in research methods seminars and undergraduate students in beginning reporting classes. Offices on the ballot included governor, U.S. senator and U.S. representative. Telephone numbers used in the survey were randomly generated by computer from exchanges in Austin. Based on 1980 census data, the sample slightly overrepresented women (52.6 percent in the sample and

51 percent in the census), more drastically overrepresented whites (82.5 percent in the sample and 65 percent in the census) and underrepresented older residents (10.9 percent were 55 and older in the sample, compared with 18.4 percent in the census).

Several questions were specifically included in the survey to test the Gamson and Modigliani models.

Knowledge concerning nuclear issues was measured with the following three open-ended questions:

> When people are discussing national defense, they sometimes use the term "nuclear fallout." What does "fallout" mean when it is used this way?
>
> In the same area -- national defense -- people sometimes talk about an "ICBM." What does "ICBM" stand for?
>
> Another term that comes up in discussions of national defense is "MX." What is the "MX"?

A response to the first question was considered correct if it mentioned radioactive particles or aftereffects of a nuclear explosion. Responses such as "contamination" or "pollution" were not considered correct. A correct response was given 1 point.

A response to the second question was considered correct only if it gave the complete answer, InterContinental Ballistic Missile. A correct response was given 1 point.

A response to the third question was given 1 point if it mentioned "missile" and 2 points if it mentioned hiding or moving the missile.

The three knowledge questions made an acceptable Guttman

scale, with a coefficient of reproducibility of .908 and a coefficient of scalability of .615.

Scores on the three questions were summed to give a possible knowledge score of 0 to 4. This was then collapsed to three knowledge categories to make this study comparable to the earlier ones -- low (scores of 0 and 1), medium (score of 2) and high (scores of 3 and 4).

Opinions on specific policies in the nuclear weapons area were obtained with the following questions:

> . . . people have different ideas about how our national defense should be handled. I am going to read you three statements. After you hear each statement, please tell me whether you agree or disagree with it.
>
> The President of the United States should propose to the Soviet Union that together, and at the same time, both the USA and USSR should freeze the arms race. Do you agree or disagree?
>
> The United States should avoid a nuclear freeze agreement with the Soviet Union until the two countries have equal strength in nuclear weapons. Do you agree or disagree?
>
> The United States should announce that it will NOT be the first to use nuclear weapons. Do you agree or disagree?

The first statement is one version of the nuclear freeze proposition. The second statement presents the Jackson-Warner alternative to the freeze, which is the position of the Reagan administration. In this study, it represents the "mainstream"

position. The third statement presents the proposal of former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and others that the United States announce a "no first use" policy. This policy, like the freeze itself, is one that the Reagan administration has rejected.

A measure of general political attitudes or assumptions was necessary to test the cognitive consistency model. The following question was used for that purpose:

> In more general terms, do you think of yourself as being a liberal, a conservative or a more middle-of-the-road person?

The three models were tested primarily with cross-tabulations, as was done in the two earlier studies. Following the procedures of Sigelman and Conover, refusal and "don't know" responses to the attitude questions were omitted before the analysis. This allowed creation of approve-disapprove dichotomies and meant that Kendall's Tau-C could be used as the measure of association.

Findings

The survey found 66 percent of the Austin sample in favor of the nuclear freeze, 28 percent opposed, 5 percent who didn't know and 1 percent who refused to answer. This level of support for the freeze is slightly less than the 72 percent found by the CBS/ New York Times poll or the 71 percent reported by ABC-News and The Washington Post.

The relationships between approval for a specific policy and levels of knowledge are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 About Here

The first statement, a statement of support for a nuclear freeze, shows a steady and significant increase in approval as knowledge level increases. This provides some support for the enlightenment model, since the enlightenment model suggests that with increasing knowledge, people are likely to reject belligerent policies.

The second statement, a position of waiting for nuclear weapons parity between the United States and the Soviet Union before a freeze, shows a steady and significant decrease in approval as knowledge increases. This decline runs directly contrary to the mainstream model, which states that greater knowledge should accompany greater conformity of foreign policy opinions to official policy.

The third statement, the idea of "no first use," does not appear to be positively or negatively related to levels of knowledge.

The results of Table 1, then, provide strong support for the enlightenment model and no support for the mainstream model.

A first step in testing the cognitive consistency model is provided in Table 2, which examines the relationships between ideology and specific policy options. It would be difficult to argue for the cognitive consistency model if there were not relationships in general between ideology and specific policies.

Table 2 shows significant relationships between general ideology and all three specific policies. Support for the freeze is strongest among liberals and weakest among conservatives, although a majority of all three ideological categories supports a freeze. Support for waiting for a freeze is strongest among conservatives and weakest among liberals. Support for "no first use" is strongest among liberals and weakest among conservatives.

Table 2 About Here

The real test of the cognitive consistency model is presented in Table 3, however. The table shows support for the cognitive consistency for all three specific policies. The cognitive consistency model predicts that the greater the knowledge, the stronger the relationship between one's general beliefs and opinions on specific policies. This is the case for each of the three policies. The Tau-C coefficients increase regularly as one moves from left to right in the table, or from low knowledge to high knowledge. The relationship is particularly noticeable for "no first use," where Tau-C increases from a nonsignificant -.086 to a significant -.540. The polarization that Gamson and Modigliani said occurs under the cognitive consistency model is also very evident for responses to the "no first use" policy by respondents high in knowledge. In this cell, "no first use" is supported by 75.6 percent of the liberals but only 10.3 percent of the conservatives.

Table 3 About Here

Conclusions

This study provides some support for the enlightenment and cognitive consistency models, and essentially no support for the mainstream model. The support for the enlightenment model is qualified. The predicted relationship between higher levels of knowledge and support for less belligerent policies showed up for the nuclear freeze but not for "no first use." The support for the cognitive consistency model is rather strong. The predicted increase in the strength of the relationship between general ideology and specific policies as knowledge level increases showed up for all three policies.

These findings appear to differ dramatically from those of the Gamson and Modigliani study, which found support for the mainstream and cognitive consistency models, and from those of the Sigelman and Conover study, which found little support for the enlightenment and cognitive consistency models, but some support for the mainstream model.

A re-examination of one of the tables in the Gamson and Modigliani article actually suggests, however, that they found some support for the enlightenment model and that their results might not differ quite so much from the present results. In examining the relationship between knowledge and belief about military spending, Gamson and Modigliani focused on the middle

option -- that military strength is about right (see their Table 1). Since that was the official government policy and increasing knowledge was associated with increasing support for that option, they interpreted the results as supporting the mainstream model. The same cross-tabulation, however, shows that belief in reduced military strength grows with increasing knowledge and that belief in expanded military strength decreases with increasing knowledge. These results are supportive of the enlightenment model.

Nevertheless, the results of the three studies are still inconsistent. How can these different results be explained? What seems likely is that one model is appropriate in certain situations and another model is appropriate in other situations. The next step for research, then, might be to specify the conditions in which the various models are applicable. This task amounts to specifying the variables that determine when the various models are applicable.

One of these variables that might determine whether or not the enlightenment model holds is the degree of rationality of the nonbelligerent policy. The enlightenment model states that increased knowledge will be associated with decreased belligerence. But surely this will happen only if the less belligerent policy is a rational one and logically follows from the facts. That idea is what the word "enlightenment" implies -- that people will see the rationality of the position. But some antibelligerent positions are more rational than others. In the present study, for instance, respondents might have considered a freeze, which is mutual or

bilateral, to be more rational than a policy of "no first use," which is unilateral.

Another reason for the enlightenment model being supported more in 1982 than in 1963 may have to do with a changing perception of experts by the public. Rosi suggested in 1965 that in a highly technical area like nuclear weapons testing, people are likely to look to experts for guidance.[10] But Boyte has argued more recently in a discussion of the nuclear freeze issue that people have begun turning away from the experts and relying on their own common sense and good judgment.[11] Boyte's argument is supported in this study by the overwhelming support for the freeze that cuts across ideological categories, the finding that support for the freeze increases with knowledge and the finding that support for "no first use" -- a more radical proposal -- does not increase with knowledge.

One final thought may be worth noting. Many people have been trying to understand the sudden emergence of public opinion in favor of a nuclear freeze. Perhaps that support has been there all along. Russett notes that there was "substantial, if perhaps shallow" support for mutual disarmament in public opinion polls between 1946 and 1963.[12] This latent support for a freeze might have been suddenly brought to the forefront in the last year or so -- through media attention, through the public's perception that there was a more belligerent presidential administration or, ironically, by being "discovered" through public opinion polling itself.

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10 Eugene J. Rosi, "Mass and Attentive Opinion on Nuclear Weapons Tests and Fallout, 1954-1963," Public Opinion Quarterly 29: 280-297 (Summer, 1965).

11 Boyte, op. cit.

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Table 1

Relationship Between Levels of Knowledge and Approval of Specific Policy Options

	N	Overall approval	Approval by knowledge levels Low	Med	High	Tau-C
Freeze the arms race	381	70.1%	62.5	75.8	75.6	.128*
Wait for a freeze until the US and USSR are equal	371	35.6%	41.0	34.0	29.7	-.106*
US announce "no first use"	374	48.9%	47.8	54.3	46.2	-.006

* $p < .05$

Table 2

Relationship Between General Ideology and Approval of Specific Policy Options

	N	Overall approval	Approval by ideological orientation Lib	Mod	Cons	Tau-C
Freeze the arms race	371	70.1%	82.1	73.4	54.2	-.224*
Wait for a freeze until the US and USSR are equal	364	35.7%	18.3	38.0	48.0	.230*
US announce "no first use"	364	48.9%	67.0	50.3	30.8	-.290*

* $p < .05$

Table 3

Relationship Between General Ideology and Approval of Specific Options, Examined at Different Levels of Knowledge

	Knowledge/belief system								
	Low			Med			High		
	Lib	Mod	Cons	Lib	Mod	Cons	Lib	Mod	Cons
Freeze the arms race	68.8	66.2	52.8	86.4	81.6	53.8	90.2	75.0	57.1
Tau-C/N	-.137* (156)			-.251* (97)			-.269* (117)		
Wait for a freeze until the US and USSR are equal	36.7	36.8	51.1	9.1	41.7	44.0	9.8	36.2	46.4
Tau-C/N	.122 (153)			.250* (95)			.317* (116)		
US announce "no first use"	53.1	49.3	42.6	71.4	58.7	29.2	75.6	43.8	10.3
Tau-C/N	-.086 (155)			-.320* (91)			-.540* (118)		

* $p < .05$